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WHAT SHALL THE ADULT BIBLE CLASS DO WITH MODERN BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP?

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THE answer is largely dependent upon the answer to the inverted question: What will the new biblical scholarship do with the adult class? If the class consists of persons whose mental and religious attitude is such that it is sure to do them harm, they had better let it alone. Faith is more important than knowledge. To many classes the whole system of modern biblical scholarship would be only a stumbling-block and a trial of faith and patience. It is true that a class has a mission of enlightenment, but even in the case of enlightenment it is not unwise to count the cost. There are classes in which, for one reason or another, there is such a prejudice against the views for which modern scholarship stands that it is the part, not of cowardice, but of wisdom, to ignore them.

But on the whole the danger to the adult class lies in another direction. It is a little too easy for a class to take the line of least resistance and ignore what would be really of great help to them. An intelligent class may well question seriously if they can afford to decide that they do not care to know what the majority of the best scholars in the biblical world are saying about the Bible. Such a decision is hardly in accord with the general tradition of American intelligence. It looks rather queer to those who stand outside the church in the attitude of critics of our religious life. It is a little too much like the ostrich with his head in the sand, to be a wholly dignified Christian position.

If I should seem to be harsh toward the religious attitude of a great multitude of noble and earnest Christians, let me hasten to add a word which furnishes a reasonable explanation of their position. I am convinced that this attitude is largely due to the

influence of two elements. One is the inherited dogmatism of tradition. It says: "The position of your fathers is true. You want no change, you want no questions raised. You do not even care to know what any other position is." It is our boast that we have freed ourselves from this kind of dogmatism, but there is still much of it abroad. The other is the dogmatism of certain biblical scholars. Whether because of the influence of the older dogmatic attitude of theology or what, it is a fact that there has sometimes been an undue amount of positiveness of opinions and a demand that other people shall accept these opinions as final.

The conscious or unconscious result of both kinds of dogmatism has been to make many adult classes unwilling to hear anything about newer views regarding the Bible. Such classes can only think of them as put forward with a demand that they be accepted as true. Now no wise teacher will put biblical theories before an adult class in that way; but many classes may well study them in order to find what scholars think. It is not necessary that the class should believe them, or even raise the question whether to believe them or not. If this whole matter could be placed on the ground of information about what the best scholars think, rather than on the ground of the acceptance or rejection of these views, a large part of the objection to this study would vanish.

Thus far I have spoken with classes of the older people in mind. The teacher of a class of young people may well question whether attention to the newer scholarship is a matter of preference or obligation. The modern conception and interpretation of the Bible are "in the air," they are taught in our universities, they are the common stock of a good deal of literature. Some of them are assumed in most of the popular and nearly all of the scholarly books on the Bible. It is hardly exaggeration to say that a person cannot be intelligent on biblical matters without knowing much about them. As time goes on some hypotheses now adopted will be modified, no doubt; but many of them will be the common views of the next generation, held with no thought of harm to faith. The situation regarding

them is very much like that regarding evolution twenty-five years ago, or regarding the theories of geology at a still earlier period.

Is it wise or kind, or even right, to send young people out into the world, not only with no knowledge of these views, but with ideas about the Bible which will precipitate either a struggle for readjustment or a loss of faith if they should ever adopt them? Of one thing I am sure—and I wish it could be impressed on the mind of every teacher of young people in our Sunday schools—that it is wholly wrong to give young people the idea that the investigations and judgments of modern biblical scholarship are dangerous to the Bible, and that their design is to destroy faith in God and in the Holy Scriptures. The Bible scholars of our generation are not irreverent or un-Christian; they are not infallible, but they are sincere seekers after truth.

This does not mean that a class, whether of younger or older people, should set out on the deliberate study of the details of some biblical problem. That should never be done, unless the class really wants it and the teacher is prepared to teach it. Most of these questions rest on so technical a basis that no person is prepared to teach them who has not had a technical training in them. In general, a teacher cannot prepare for this work by reading books. Even a theological training does not necessarily fit one to teach them.

With general results, however, rather than with details, the case is somewhat different. Many classes ought to take the results of modern scholarship into account. Results which are commonly accepted by recognized biblical scholars should be made the basis of teaching. For example, Ecclesiastes should be assigned to wise men of late Hebrew times, and Daniel to the Maccabean period. The class may simply assume this and proceed to study the books on this basis. Results which are largely, even if not commonly, accepted by modern scholars may also properly be considered. A teacher of an adult class will do well to know what these results are, even if he never purposes to present them in class. He would not desire to teach any other subject without knowing what the best scholars held regarding it.

The Bible, however, is a large field. It is not necessary that either class or teacher should try to cover it all at once. It will be quite sufficient if they obtain the results which belong to the portion they are studying. Even if the teacher does not present them to the class, the study will make his own teaching richer. It is usually possible, however, to present them simply and clearly. If this is done, the great question should not be: "Must we accept this, and straightway overturn all our old ideas?" Men do not treat new theories on any subject in that way. They should simply be treated as matters for consideration, as ideas about the way this part of the Bible was formed which are widespread among biblical scholars. Often the minister can give the class a talk on the subject which will be extremely valuable both for him and for them.

In all this matter, the great thing to be desired is calmness, patience, toleration, a truth-seeking spirit, and the recognition of the fact that all who love the Bible are working together, however they may differ in opinions, with the common purpose of finding the truth. And back of the truth stands God.